

## The Last Piece To Make Me Whole

Her hand brushed over the edge of the puzzle piece beneath her collarbones. The right upper corner was not jutting out. Naomi could see that much. But it felt like it. When she had first put the greenish piece in, it had fit. Kind of. They did always fit somewhat. This one, at least, hadn't felt as loose as previous ones had. Though the right upper corner was chafing at the edge, feeling like it was jutting out. But it hadn't within the past ten minutes of checking or the half hour before that when she had still been at home. At home, where she had been contemplating whether to just cover it up because it all just didn't feel right.

Naomi's gaze fell downwards, ignoring the dozen or so puzzle pieces hovering in the air in their colourless and transparent form. The music from the floor below changed again, turning from lo-fi to a bass-heavy song that was vibrating through the floor under her feet into the bathroom. This was the fourth song since she had excused herself. Her eyes shot up from her shoes to focus again on the mirror.

Okay. She could do this. She needed to get out there again otherwise, it would become obvious. The problem was only in her head. No one else could see it. But the numbing buzzing coming from slightly below her collarbones - from her *centre* - had consumed her. Especially, since all her other pieces were perfectly in place. Their slightly transparent colours were forming a healthy rainbow spectacle on her skin. She could feel the connection to each of them like they were a separate heartbeat. It was a normal puzzle, like what every other normal person would have on their body, every piece representing a single character trait, an important insight or a moral viewpoint. It was a picture spread out over her whole body showing her true person, showing - at least to herself - that she didn't feel the connection to her *centre*.

She took out the purple hoodie she had packed, just in case, and put it on. Not the look she had been going for, but it worked anyway with her torn jeans. Naomi took a moment to check herself in the mirror and make sure that her brown waves or the light make-up highlighting her orange-brown eyes still looked acceptable. Even though she had a red blush on her cheeks from the frustration, it could have been a lot worse. She stepped outside the bathroom, the music from the floor below hitting her full volume and getting louder with every step she took towards the stairs. She took a deep breath - no one could see her *centre* now - and tried to refrain from glaring in absolute frustration at the puzzle pieces hovering beside her.

It had been their fault after all. She had been doing fine ignoring the restricting fit of the puzzle piece tearing at her *centre*. It had just been an itch in the background. But then Naomi had entered her friend's house, Sara greeting her with that big smile, wearing that beautiful turquoise dress that worked so well with her strawberry blonde hair.... And then there was this puzzle piece beside Sara's head that... Could this be a better fit? Perhaps, she had analysed the situation wrong. But what about her crush? She had been so sure that she finally had managed to be into a guy. This actor in her new favourite TV series was so handsome, she definitely had had a crush on him. After all, she could tell that he looked good, which meant he looked hot, right? Was she perhaps bi? Looking at Sara in her pretty dress and her beautiful updo hairstyle had the same effect on her as her crush on this actor. That had been a crush, right?

The uncomfortable buzzing that was coming from her *centre* had increased, making her feel foreign in her own skin. The piece had lost its fit - if it had ever had one in the first place.

«Naomi, you alright?» Sara had opened the door to invite her in but had gotten no reaction.

Standing in the entrance frozen, Naomi had been staring at her friend without even blinking. Since she had excused herself to use the toilet right after, she now had to make sure to mingle with her classmates, who were dancing in the living room, without making it awkward.

Naomi closed her eyes once she had reached the last step of the stairs. It didn't matter how hard she

was searching for it, she could feel all the pieces adorning her body but one. So be it. She let go of it, like she had done it with a dozen before, having not ever felt a connection to any of them. The moment her *centre* was empty, absent, Naomi felt like a child again.

Opening her eyes again, she went around the corner beside the stairs to enter the living room and was faced with her class' private graduation party. Naomi smiled at a few of her classmates that greeted her, lingering on couches reaching for snacks on the table. Especially with a few of them wearing dresses, it was yelling at her, the fact that they had it but she didn't. Walking through the room she took note of the different colours and shapes of each of their centrepieces, positioned beneath their collarbones as if they had always been there. Naomi hunched up her shoulders slightly, feeling as if her hoodie wasn't doing a good enough job at hiding the black spot above her chest. She was about to go to university and needed to finally find her *centrepiece*.

Even though the music was loud and the beat was almost forcing itself in under her skin, she needed to find that other puzzle piece. Therefore, she was steering towards Sara, who was chatting with two girls from their writing club in the kitchen, filling up empty bowls of crisps.

«Oh, Naomi! Are you better now?»

She nodded, trying to look not too distracted while scanning the room for that puzzle piece.

«You want some?» Ella pushed a bowl of sour creme crisps towards her on the kitchen island. Violet put a crisp in her mouth and nodded at her as if approving of the crisps before Naomi could take one.

«I'm good.» She couldn't see the puzzle piece anywhere here, the five pieces hovering around the room looking nothing alike.

«You sure?» Sara pushed a bowl of paprika crisps towards her, nodding her head as a sign to take some of them instead. She seemed worried. Sure, Naomi had made a weird entry, but nothing more. Perhaps Sara cared more about her than she thought she did? How would she be able to tell? What was the difference between friendship and *love* or a crush? Obviously, they would eventually sleep with each other if they slept together instead of staying friends. That's just what you do, right? But how did people get from knowing they were friends with someone to sleeping with them? Did it boil down to whether she found her hot? Naomi could see that Sara had a beautiful face, nice cheekbones and a warm smile, as well as a nice figure. So, therefore she was hot...

And she liked being around Sara. The two of them would do everything together, would talk about anything and Sara gave the best hugs. Naomi liked cuddling into her side when they were watching a film, too. She tried to imagine whether she would want to kiss her. But the image felt wrong in her head and made her body tingle in a way that made her skin crawl. Was that the reason why she couldn't see the puzzle piece anymore? Because she wasn't into girls anyway? It would make sense, given that her 'being into Sara' felt the same as her 'actor crush' and the latter piece hadn't connected with her either. But it's not like it hadn't fit. Had she just needed to wait longer? Would it...

«Awww, you have to look at this. Isn't my niece adorable?» Violet pushed her phone into their faces, a small toddler showing up on the screen that was standing on her two wobbly legs, grinning like a Cheshire cat at her achievement.

«Oh, she's your niece? So cute», Sara commented.

Naomi was drowning out whatever Ella had been saying, too occupied with the puzzle that was Violet's niece. Not that she had a lot of pieces, she was still a lot more colourless than an adult would be. But the one piece that had caught her attention was the one that looked the same as hers at the moment. Because her *centre* looked like a child's. Nonexistent. Naive. Childish. Immature. Undeveloped. Even though she could almost be considered an adult, she was lacking a literal central factor to pass as one.

Naomi was about to excuse herself again and head to the bathroom when the kitchen door opened.

«Okay, I need your opinion guys.» Their classmate Carlos came rushing into the room, followed by Maria, both of them stopping at the kitchen island, Maria's grin already speaking volumes. «Fuck-Marry-Kill Brandon, Nick and me. What's your choice», he continued, waiting for an answer.

«Fuck Nick, marry Brandon, kill you», Violet let out without any hesitation and a snigger.

«Why? What do you two have against me?» Carlos looked at Maria and Violet with feigned frustration. «And you Sara?» Everyone turned towards her.

«I'll respect my fellow women's decision, I'm sorry.» She pushed the bowl of crisps towards Carlos with too wide a grin. «Here, to salvage your ego.»

«You guys are doing it all wrong», Ella interrupted. «You have to marry Carlos, he is the one who's got the money. Then you kill him and marry Brandon. His parents own a hotel.»

«So you still end up killing Carlos, marrying Brandon and fucking Nick, though.», Violet pointed out.

«No. I end up with more money and fucking Maria.» Ella grabbed a beer from the kitchen counter, lifted it in the air, «Cheers», and drank.

Sara, Violet and Maria started clapping which was followed by Ella trying to bow without spilling her beer, while Carlos turned towards Naomi.

«Okay. Come on Naomi, please tell me you're the sane one here.» Carlos, and suddenly everyone else, was looking at her. He was having struggling maintaining the hurt facade, having started to laugh by now, like everyone else.

It felt like a game. The five of them had been passing each other a ball in quick and practised movements, their banter seemingly a thing of instinct. And now they had passed the ball to her. She knew how to play many games, but this one was beyond her comprehension. Sure, she could have easily played along without thinking too much about it. But, especially tonight, she wanted to understand the rules of this game. If everyone else has already learned them, she needs to hurry up otherwise, she won't ever be able to play the same game as them.

«How do you decide that anyway? Whether to fuck or marry someone, that is.» Her question went down like a lead balloon. That apparently had not been part of the game.

«Well... If you don't want to fuck them but also not straight up kill them, you go with marriage. You won't have any sex with them anyway.» Carlos had caught the ball nonetheless. And the others were picking up on it, laughing again.

«But, like, what would then be the difference between being friends with them and being married to them?» Now she was poking holes into a balloon that had miraculously been resurrected again.

«Naomi, that's just a joke. Most people still have sex in their marriage. At least if it's a functioning one.» Violet had stopped laughing, sensing that the game was over. «You know that, right?» The question was delivered with an unsure chuckling.

«Yeah, that's not...» Naomi let out a frustrated sigh and looked around the room. All five of them were looking at her. Sara was edging closer to her along the counter, about to say something. Before she could change her mind she shimmied out of her hoodie. She couldn't waste any more time on this.

She threw her purple hoodie on the counter. The low neckline of her red tank top allowed a perfect view of the black hole above her chest, in the form of a puzzle piece, highlighted by the many colourful pieces surrounding it.

«How did you find your *centrepiece*? What did you feel that told you who you're into?» Naomi's voice had gone from loudly frustrated to a quiet pleading within two short sentences. Now she was standing there, feeling all their gazes focused on her, wanting to disappear. She felt like a child asking their parents what they did to grow up.

Sara stood beside her, putting her soft hand on her shoulder. «Naomi, the centre...»

«Oh, that doesn't look normal. Did you get that checked or something?»

Everyone's attention jumped to Brandon who had just entered the kitchen, staring at Naomi like she

had a broken bone that was twisted in the wrong direction.

She grabbed her hoodie, pressed it to her chest and hurried past Brandon out of the kitchen, through the living room, ignoring the confused stares or people loudly following her. Opening the door, she left the house and hurried down the path through the garden in front of Sara's house.

Once she reached the street, she came to an abrupt halt. Leaving hadn't been the most adult thing to do. But she had needed to get outside, to get away. Since she was definitely not going in there again after all of this, she would take the bus and go home. Though when Naomi reached for her bag to check her purse, she realised that it wasn't there. It was still inside. Great.

She cowered down, sitting on the side of the pavement while staring at the purple cotton of her hoodie. Was it just her fault for dramatising it all? What if her pieces had fit? What if she had just missed the connection to them because she had not been paying enough attention? Brandon's face of pity and concern appeared in front of her. If this had been the reaction, then she needed to find a piece as soon as possible. She would just need to search more, to try harder. She...

A familiar soft hand stroked her shoulder, hesitantly. Naomi looked up to Sara who was sitting down beside her. A soft smile adorned her face, though her eyes held a tinge of sadness.

Naomi gave her a half-hearted smile, taking in the comfort it gave her sitting close to her friend.

«Do you think it looks abnormal?» Naomi kept her eyes focused on the pavement in front of her.

«It certainly isn't common.» Sara put a hand on her back, rubbing small circles over her spine. «But uncommon doesn't mean it's bad. We can't all be the same. There will always be something about everyone that is rather uncommon.»

Naomi let out a frustrated sigh and turned her head towards Sara. «I just don't know anymore whether there will ever be a puzzle that fits. In the beginning, I thought I just have to wait.

Eventually, you all found one. And they might have fit. By now I am simply not able to recognise if they fit or not.»

Sara took in Naomi's sadness and turned herself away from the pavement in front of them, facing her friend completely. «Perhaps you can't tell whether they fit or not because all these *centrepieces* belong to a puzzle that just doesn't resonate with you. And no one said it has to. There will always be empty slots in our puzzles. You can't be everything, that's human. Just because your empty slot is the *centrepiece* doesn't make it any worse. Besides, it's about the overall picture and not every single piece within.»

Sara lifted her hand and put it above a red puzzle piece above Naomi's heart, her heartbeat quickening and vibrating against the slight pressure on her chest. «Some pictures might be ruined if you overdo it with the colour. Every puzzle has its unique beauty.»